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THE STORY OF MARIA LOUISE MOORE AND FANNIE M. RICHARDS¹

The State of Virginia has been the home of distinguished persons of both sexes of the white and colored races. A dissertation on the noted colored women of Virginia would find a small circle of readers but would, nevertheless, contain interesting accounts of some of the most important achievements of the people of that State. The story of Maria Louise Moore-Richards would be a large chapter of such a narrative. She was born of white and Negro parentage in Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1800. Her father was Edwin Moore, a Scotchman of Edinburgh. Her mother was a free woman of color, born in Toronto when it was called York. Exactly how they came to Fredericksburg is not known. It seems, however, that they had been well established in that city when Maria Louise Moore was born.

This woman was fortunate in coming into the world at that time. So general had been the efforts for the elevation of the colored people that free Negroes had many of the privileges later given only to white people. Virginia then and for a long time thereafter ranked among the commonwealths most liberal toward the Negro. The dissemination of information among them was not then restricted, private teaching of slaves was common, and progressive communities maintained colored schools.^{1a} In Fredericksburg such opportunities were not rare. The parents of Maria Louise Moore fortunately associated with the free Negroes who constituted an industrial class with adequate means to provide for the thorough training of their children. Miss Moore, therefore, easily acquired the rudiments of education and attained some distinction as a student of history.

¹ For many of the facts set forth in this article the writer is indebted to Miss Fannie M. Richards, Robert A. Pelham, and C. G. Woodson.

^{1a} Woodson, *The Ed. of the Negro Prior to 1861*, pp. 92, 217, 218.

In 1820 Miss Moore was married to Adolphe Richards, a native of the Island of Guadaloupe. He was a Latin of some Negro blood, had noble ancestry, and had led an honorable career. Educated in London and resident in Guadaloupe, he spoke both English and French fluently. Because of poor health in later years he was directed by his friends to the salubrious climate of Virginia. He settled at Fredericksburg, where he soon became captivated by the charms of the talented Maria Louise Moore. On learning of his marriage, his people and friends marveled that a man of his standing had married a colored woman or a Southern woman at all.

Adjusting himself to this new environment, Mr. Richards opened a shop for wood-turning, painting and glazing. It is highly probable that he learned these trades in the West Indies, but having adequate means to maintain himself, he had not depended on his mechanical skill. In Fredericksburg he had the respect and support of the best white people, passing as one of such well-to-do free Negroes as the Lees, the Cooks, the De Baptistes, who were contractors, and the Williamses, who were contractors and brickmakers. His success was in a large measure due to the good standing of the family of Mrs. Richards and to the wisdom with which she directed this West Indian in his new environment.

They had in all fourteen children, the training of whom was largely the work of the mother. All of them were well grounded in the rudiments of education and given a taste for higher things. In the course of time when the family grew larger the task of educating them grew more arduous. Some of them probably attended the school conducted by a Scotch-Irishman in the home of Richard De Baptiste. When the reaction against the teaching of Negroes effected the closing of the colored schools in Virginia, this one continued clandestinely for many years. Determined to have her children better educated, Mrs. Richards sent one of her sons to a school conducted by Mrs. Beecham, a remarkable English woman, assisted by her daughter. These women were

bent on doing what they could to evade the law interpreted as prohibiting any one from either sitting or standing to teach a black to read. They, therefore, gathered the colored children around them while they lay prostrate on the couch to teach them. For further evasion they kept on hand splinters of wood which they had the children dip into a match preparation and use with a flint for ignition to make it appear that they were showing them how to make matches. When this scheme seemed impracticable, one of the boys was sent to Washington in the District of Columbia to attend the school maintained by John F. Cook, a successful educator and founder of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church. This young man was then running the risk of expatriation, for Virginia had in 1838 passed a law, prohibiting the return to that State of those Negroes, who after the prohibition of their education had begun to attend schools in other parts.²

It was because of these conditions that in 1851 when her husband died Mrs. Richards sold out her property and set out to find a better home in Detroit, Michigan. Some of the best white people of Fredericksburg commended her for this step, saying that she was too respectable a woman to suffer such humiliation as the reaction had entailed upon

² The law was as follows:

Be it enacted by the General Assembly that if any free person of color, whether infant or adult, shall go or be sent or carried beyond the limits of this Commonwealth for the purpose of being educated, he or she shall be deemed to have emigrated from the State and it shall not be lawful for him or her to return to the same; and if any such person shall return within the limits of the State contrary to the provisions of this act, he or she being an infant shall be bound out as an apprentice until the age of 21 years, by the overseers of the poor of the county or corporation where he or she may be, and at the expiration of that period, shall be sent out of the State agreeably to the provisions of the laws now in force, or which may hereafter be enacted to prohibit the migration of free persons of color to this State; and if such person be an adult, he or she shall be sent in like manner out of the Commonwealth; and if any persons having been so sent off, shall hereafter return within the State, he or she so offending shall be dealt with and punished in the same manner as is or may be prescribed by law in relating to other persons of color returning to the State after having been sent therefrom. Acts of the General Assembly of Virginia, 1838, p. 76.

persons of her race.³ She was followed by practically all of the best free Negroes of Fredericksburg. Among these were the Lees, the Cooks, the Williamsses and the De Baptists. A few years later this group attracted the Pelham family from Petersburg. They too had tired of seeing their rights gradually taken away and, therefore, transplanted themselves to Detroit.

³ The following enactments of the Virginia General Assembly will give a better idea of the extent of this humiliation:

4. Be it further enacted that all meetings of free Negroes or mulattoes at any school house, church, meeting-house or other place for teaching them reading or writing, either in the day or night, under whatsoever pretext, shall be deemed and considered as an unlawful assembly; and any justice of the county or corporation, wherein such assemblage shall be, either from his own knowledge, or on the information of others, of such unlawful assemblage or meeting, shall issue his warrant directed to any sworn officer or officers, authorizing him or them to enter the house or houses where such unlawful assemblage or meeting may be, for the purpose of apprehending or dispersing such free Negroes or mulattoes and to inflict corporal punishment on the offender or offenders at the discretion of any justice of the peace, not exceeding 20 lashes.

5. Be it further enacted that if any white person or persons assemble with free Negroes or mulattoes, at any school house, church, meeting-house, or other place for the purpose of instructing such free Negroes or mulattoes to read or write, such person or persons shall, on conviction thereof, be fined in a sum not exceeding fifty dollars, and moreover may be imprisoned at the discretion not exceeding two months.

6. Be it further enacted that if any white persons for pay or compensation, shall assemble with any slaves for the purpose of teaching and shall teach any slave to read or write, such persons or any white person or persons contracting with such teacher so to act, who shall offend as aforesaid, shall for each offence, be fined at the discretion of a jury in a sum not less than ten nor exceeding one hundred dollars, to be recovered on an information or indictment. Acts of the General Assembly of Virginia, 1831, p. 107.

I. Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia that no slave, free Negro or mulatto, whether he shall have been ordained or licensed or otherwise, shall hereafter undertake to preach, exhort or conduct or hold any assembly or meeting, for religious or other purposes, either in the day time or at night; and any slave, free Negro or mulatto so offending shall for every such offence be punished with stripes at the discretion of any justice of the peace, not exceeding 39 lashes; and any person desiring so to do, shall have authority without any previous written precept or otherwise, to apprehend any such offender and carry him before such justice.

II. Any slave, free Negro or mulatto who shall hereafter attend any preaching, meeting or other assembly, held or pretended to be held for religious purposes, or other instruction, conducted by any slave, free Negro or mulatto preacher, ordained or otherwise; any slave who shall hereafter attend any preaching

The attitude of the people of Detroit toward immigrating Negroes had been reflected by the position the people of that section had taken from the time of the earliest settlements. Slavery was prohibited by the Ordinance of 1787. In 1807 there arose a case in which a woman was required to answer for the possession of two slaves. Her contention was that they were slaves on British territory at the time of the surrender of the post in 1796 and that Jay's Treaty assured them to her. Her contention was sustained.⁴ A few days later a resident of Canada attempted under this ruling to secure the arrest and return of some mulatto and Indian slaves who had escaped from Canada. The court held that slavery did not exist in Michigan except in the case of slaves in the possession of the British settlers within the Northwest Territory July 11, 1796, and that there was no obligation to give up fugitives from a foreign jurisdiction. An effort was made to take the slaves by force but the agent of the owner was tarred and feathered.⁴

Generally speaking, Detroit adhered to this position.^{4a}

in the night time although conducted by a white minister, without a written permission from his or her owner, overseer or master or agent of either of them, shall be punished by stripes at the discretion of any justice of the peace, not exceeding 39 lashes, and may for that purpose be apprehended by any person, without any written or other precept:

Provided, That nothing herein contained shall be so construed as to prevent the master or owner of slaves or any white person to whom any free Negro or mulatto is bound, or in whose employment, or on whose plantation or lot such free Negro or mulatto lives, from carrying or permitting any such slave, free Negro or mulatto, to go with him, her or them, or with any part of his, her, or their white family to any place of worship, conducted by a white minister in the night time: And provided also, That nothing in this or any former law, shall be construed as to prevent any ordained or licensed white minister of the gospel, or any layman licensed for that purpose by the denomination to which he may belong, from preaching or giving religious instruction to slaves, free Negroes and mulattoes in the day time; nor to deprive any masters or owners of slaves of the right to engage, or employ any free white person whom they think proper to give religious instruction to their slaves; nor to prevent the assembling of slaves of any one owner or master together at any time for religious devotion. Acts of the General Assembly of Virginia, 1831-1832, pp. 20-21.

⁴ Campbell, Political History of Michigan, 246.

^{4a} Slavery did not immediately cease, however. The number of slaves in the vicinity of Detroit in 1773 were ninety-six; 127 in 1778; and 175 in 1783. Detroit had a colored population of 15 in 1805 and two years later a number

In 1827 there was passed an act providing for the registry of the names of all colored persons, requiring the possession of a certificate showing that they were free and a bond in the sum of \$500 for their good behavior.⁵ This law was obnoxious to the growing sentiment of freedom in Detroit and was not enforced until the Riot of 1833. This uprising was an attack on the Negroes because a courageous group of them had effected the rescue and escape of one Thornton Blackburn and his wife, who had been arrested by the sheriff as alleged fugitives from Kentucky.⁶ The anti-slavery feeling considerably increased thereafter. The Detroit Anti-Slavery Society was formed in 1837, other societies to secure the relief and escape of slaves quickly followed and still another was organized to find employment and purchase homes for refugees.⁷ This change of sentiment is further

had sufficiently increased for Governor Hull to organize a company of militia among them. The increase had been due to the coming of refugees from Canada. The Census of 1810 showed 17 slaves in Detroit; that of 1830 shows 32 in Michigan and an enumeration subsequent to 1836 shows that all were dead or manumitted. See Census of the United States.

⁵ Laws of Michigan, 1827.

⁶ This riot occurred on June 14, 1833. Thornton Blackburn and his wife, the alleged runaways from Kentucky, were lodged in jail pending the departure of a boat. A crowd of colored men and women, armed with clubs, stones and pistols, gathered in the vicinity of the jail. Upon the pretext of visiting Blackburn's wife a colored woman was admitted to the jail and by an exchange of clothing effected the escape of the prisoner who immediately crossed into Canada. Some time thereafter the sheriff attempted to take his other prisoner to the boat, but was knocked down and badly beaten. During the encounter the sheriff fired into the mob, but Blackburn was rescued and carried to Canada. This caused a great disturbance among the white people. They armed themselves and attacked the blacks wherever they could be found. The city council convened and undertook to dispose of the trouble by enforcing the law of 1827 requiring that colored people should stay off the streets at night. Utley, Byron and McCutcheon, "Michigan as a Province and State," II, 347.

⁷ Five years after the organization of the Detroit Anti-Slavery Society Henry Bibb, an ex-slave, came to the city and lectured for two years under the auspices of the Liberty Association, which was promoting the election of anti-slavery candidates. Public sentiment against slavery was becoming such that the Legislature of Michigan passed a law prohibiting the use of jails to detain fugitives. Frederick Douglass and John Brown found many friends of their cause in Detroit. Of the many organized efforts made to circumvent the law and assist fugitives one society purchased land and established homes for as many as 50 families between 1850 and 1872. Farmer, "History of Detroit and Michigan," I, Chapter XLVIII.

evidenced by the fact that in 1850 it was necessary to call out the three companies of volunteers to quell an incipient riot occasioned by the arrest and attempt to return a runaway slave in accordance with the Fugitive Slave Law. Save the general troubles incident to the draft riots of the Northern cities of 1863,⁸ Detroit maintained this benevolent attitude toward Negroes seeking refuge.

In this favorable community the Richards colony easily prospered. The Lees well established themselves in their Northern homes and soon won the respect of the community. Most of the members of the Williams family confined themselves to their trade of bricklaying and amassed considerable wealth. One of Mr. Williams's daughters married a well-to-do Waring living then at Wauseon, Ohio; another became the wife of one Chappée, who is now a stenographer in Detroit; and the third united in matrimony with James H. Cole, who became the head of a well-to-do family of Detroit. Then there were the Cooks descending from Lomax B. Cook, a broker of no little business ability. Will Marion Cook, the musician, belongs to this family. The De Baptistes, too, were among the first to get a foothold in this new environment and prospered materially from their experience and knowledge acquired in Fredericksburg as contractors.^{8a} From this group came Richard De Baptiste, who in his day was the most noted colored Baptist preacher in the Northwest. The Pelhams were no less successful in establishing themselves in the economic world. They enjoyed a high reputation in the community and had the sympathy and cooperation of the influential white people in the

⁸ The immediate cause of the riot in Detroit was the arrest, conviction, and imprisonment of a colored man called William Faulkner charged with committing an assault on a little girl. Feeling that the prisoner was guilty, bands of ruffians swept through the streets and mercilessly beat colored people. Seven years later it was discovered that Faulkner was innocent and to reimburse him for his losses and humiliation the same ruffians raised a handsome sum to set him up in business. See Farmer's History of Detroit and Michigan, Chapter XLVIII.

^{8a} A study of the directories of Detroit shows that a considerable number of Negroes had entered the higher pursuits of labor. See especially the Detroit Directory for 1865.

city. Out of this family came Robert A. Pelham, for years editor of a weekly in Detroit, and from 1901 to the present time an employee of the Federal Government in Washington.⁹

The children of Mrs. Richards were in no sense inferior to the descendants of the other families. She lived to see her work bear fruit in the distinguished services they rendered and the desirable connections which they made after the Civil War. Her daughter Julia married Thomas F. Carey who, after conducting a business for some years in New York, moved to Toronto, where he died. From this union came the wife of D. Augustus Straker. Her daughter Evalina married Dr. Joseph Ferguson who, prior to 1861, lived in Richmond, Virginia, uniting the three occupations of leecher, cupper and barber. This led to his coming to Detroit to study medicine. He was graduated there and practiced for many years in that city. Before the Civil War her son John D. Richards was sent to Richmond to learn a trade. There he met and became the lifelong friend of Judge George L. Ruffin, who was then living in that city.¹⁰

The most prominent and the most useful person to emerge from this group of pioneering Negroes was her daughter Fannie M. Richards. She was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, October 1, 1841. As her people left that State when she was quite young she did not see so much of the intolerable conditions as did the older members of the family. Miss Richards was successful in getting an early start in education. Desiring to have better training than what was then given to persons of color in Detroit, she went to Toronto. There she studied English, history, drawing and needlework. In later years she attended the Teachers Training School in Detroit. Her first thought was to take up teaching that she might do something to elevate her people. She, therefore, opened a private school in 1863, doing a higher grade of work than that then undertaken in the public schools. About 1862, however, a colored public

⁹ Simmons, "Men of Mark," 356.

¹⁰ In 1853 Judge Ruffin moved with his parents from Richmond to Boston, where he became judge of the Charleston District. Simmons, "Men of Mark," 469.

school had been opened by a white man named Whitbeck. Miss Richards began to think that she should have such a school herself.

Her story as to how she realized her ambition is very interesting. Going to her private school one morning, she saw a carpenter repairing a building. Upon inquiry she learned that it was to be opened as Colored School Number 2. She went immediately to William D. Wilkins, a member of the board of education, who, impressed with the personality of the young woman, escorted her to the office of superintendent of schools, Duane Dotty. After some discussion of the matter Miss Richards filed an application, assured that she would be notified to take the next examination. At the appointed time she presented herself along with several other applicants who hoped to obtain the position. Miss Richards ranked highest and was notified to report for duty the following September. Early one morning she proceeded to her private school in time to inform her forty pupils of the desirable change and conducted them in a body to their new home.

Miss Richards taught in this building until 1871, when by a liberal interpretation of the courts, the schools were mixed by ignoring race distinction wherever it occurred in the school laws of Michigan. She was then transferred to the Everett School where she remained until last June when she was retired on a pension after having served that system half a century. Although she taught very few colored children she said to a reporter several years ago:

“I have never been made to feel in any way that my race has been a handicap to me. Neither my pupils nor the teachers have ever shown prejudice; I do not doubt that it exists; I shall be in Heaven long before it has all disappeared, but I say it is with a colored teacher as it is with a white one. Her work is the only thing that counts. I have never been called before the board for a reprimand in all my years of teaching. The methods have changed a good deal since the time that I started in and it would be easy to lag behind, but I try not to. It means continual reading and study to keep up with the modern way of doing things, but I manage to

do it, and when the time comes that I cannot do my work in a satisfactory manner I want the Board of Education to discharge me and get some one else."

In testimony to these facts one of the daily papers of Detroit wrote her up in 1910, saying that she had kept her interest in modern pedagogic methods, maintained a high standard of scholarship in her school, and retained her sympathy with little children, who had rewarded her devotion to her work with their appreciation and love. To show how well she is loved by her pupils the writer was careful to state that these children as a gay group often surrounded her on her way to school, clinging to her hands, crowding about her as best they may, all chattering and pouring out accounts of their little doings. "Frequently," says this writer, "she is stopped on the street by grown men and women who long ago were her pupils and who have remembered her, though with the passing of the years, and the new classes of little ones who come to her every term, she has forgotten them."¹¹ Many have been accustomed to bring their children to the Everett School and speak of how glad they will be when these little ones will be under the care of their parents' former teacher.

Miss Richards estimates that in the years of school work, she has had in her room an average of fifty pupils a term, although sometimes the attendance overflowed to a much greater number. With eighty-eight terms of teaching to her credit, the number of pupils who owe part of their education to "this gentle and cultured woman" amounts well up into the tens of thousands, enough to populate a fair-sized city.

We can not close this article with a better testimonial than the following letter from one of her former pupils, the Honorable Charles T. Wilkins, a lawyer and an influential white citizen, who addressed her on the occasion of her retirement last June.

¹¹ This information was obtained from newspaper clippings in the possession of Miss Fannie M. Richards.

"My dear Miss Richards: The friendship of so long standing between your family and mine, and the high esteem in which, as an educator, a woman, and a Christian, you were always held by my father the late Colonel William D. Wilkins, lead me to take the liberty of writing to *congratulate* you upon the well-earned retirement from active work, which I have just learned from the press that you contemplate after so many years well spent in faithful service to our community. As a citizen and one who has always been most interested in the education of our youth, I wish to add my thanks to those which are felt, if not expressed by the many who know of your devotion to and success in leading the young in the way in which they should go.

"Though your active participation in this work is about to cease, may you long be spared as an example to those who follow you is the earnest hope of

"Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

(Signed) "CHARLES T. WILKINS"

W. B. HARTGROVE